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In it for the long run

SELLING a bus is one story – selling another and another to the same client is a different story entirely. For repeat sales, that initial sales patter has fallen by the wayside: the product and the service that accompanies that product are what matter.

Staying power is a theme common to two of the supplier stories featured in this issue: MAN Truck & Bus SA recently celebrated the handover to Golden Arrow Bus Services of its 1 000th MAN bus; while Busco/ Busafrica takes great pride in the fact that repeat business comprises the bulk of its sales (with 75% repeat business its lowest figure in the past four years).

Golden Arrow has been buying MAN buses for 15 years, investing about R1,4 billion. The operator runs more than 5 000 trips a day, with 97% of first departures leaving punctually. Golden Arrow CEO Francois Meyer says there are various factors underpinning the ties between the companies, not least of which is a “very good, sound relationship”.

In a similar vein, Busco/ Busafrica adopts a personal,

hands-on approach to every vehicle and every relationship: from the moment a client puts a query in, to the day he takes delivery of the vehicle.

Next year will be a slightly different SABOA year, with the Association’s national conference and exhibition shifted from its early slot to 24 and 25 May, in combination with the AGM. The event takes place at its traditional CSIR venue.

During the course of this year, Association members had their opportunity to have their say on what SABOA tackles during the course of 2017 during a series of bus indabas and strategic planning sessions conducted around the country. At the end of each session, delegates were divided into groups to pinpoint items they would like SABOA to deal with, or address in greater depth. Focus areas will be finalised in January.

Cindy Haler, Editor



SABOA will collate input from members during strategic planning sessions to identify focus areas for the Association in 2017. SABOA executive manager Eric Cornelius was the scribe at the Gauteng bus indaba held at the Birchwood in October



SABOA special adviser Jackie Walters anchored the Gauteng bus indaba with an overview of the Association’s activities



SABOA Bus magazine is published on behalf of SABOA by Titan Publications (Pty) Ltd,
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MAN, Golden Arrow celebrate milestone

Golden Arrow Bus Services recently took delivery of its 1 000th MAN bus, marking a significant milestone for both companies and indicating the strength of the bond the two entities have forged

THERE are myriad ways to gauge the success of relationships, but perhaps the success of the relationship between MAN Truck & Bus and Golden Arrow Bus Services can be judged by the numbers: the relationship between the two companies stretches back 17 years, during which GABS has invested about R1,4 billion in 1 000 buses which – end to end – would stretch for 13 km. The MAN component of Golden Arrow's fleet is the result of more than one million MAN labour hours.

The two companies recently celebrated the handover of the 1 000th MAN bus to Golden Arrow, a benchmark-setting Lion's Explorer HB2, featuring wi-fi connectivity as well as a USB port for every passenger.

MAN vehicles make up the bulk of the operator's 1 200-strong fleet – more than 80% – and rack up between 90 and 95% of the km the fleet covers. The relationship between the two companies was forged 17 years ago, with the first delivery – an A63 – materialising two years after that. From those initial A63 Lion's Explorers, the range of vehicles in use now encompasses Lion's Explorer HB2 (solo) and HB4 (articulated) vehicles, as well as rear engine Lion's City A84 (low floor) and RR9 (high floor) units. The operator places great emphasis on continuing to develop its line-up of products, to keep pace with trends emanating in Europe and to satisfy customer demand.

Operating more than 5 000 trips a day, 97% of Golden Arrow's first



Golden Arrow Bus Services' Francois Meyer and Gideon Neethling

departures are on time. The operator's efficiency and reliability is valued by passengers, with the service earning a resounding endorsement in a recent independent survey measuring customer satisfaction levels.

Golden Arrow Bus Services CEO Francois Meyer says that there are many factors at play in reaching the point of procuring 1 000 buses from one manufacturer, noting that while it has been 15 years since Golden Arrow took



Millennial milestone: Golden Arrow Bus Services has taken delivery of its 1 000th MAN bus



Golden Arrow Bus Services CEO Francois Meyer: there are many factors at play in reaching the point of procuring 1 000 buses from one manufacturer

possession of its first A63 it has been 17 years since the inception of the relationship.

“Just like a bus is made of a lot of different components which need to work together to make it operate optimally, there are also essential components that are necessary to enable one company to buy 1 000 buses from another company,” says Meyer. “The first essential component is a very good, sound relationship. No company would buy 1 000 buses and spend close to R1,4 billion over 17 years if there is not a strong, positive relationship.

“The second is the product itself. The vehicles have evolved from the A63, to a couple of versions of the HB2, with the same model available in the HB4 articulated and tag axle version. The MAN Lion’s Explorer is the workhorse of the South African commuter bus industry. Now we’re developing the RR9 with MAN, which is a beautiful bus.

“The third essential component is the most important one for Golden Arrow, and that is the passenger: we wouldn’t need 1 000 buses if we didn’t have the passengers.”

Meyer also acknowledged the vital role that Golden Arrow’s 2 500-strong workforce plays in ensuring that the operator continues to deliver quality service, 365 days a year.

Markus Geyer, MD of MAN Truck & Bus SA, says that many of the buses produced since the OEM established its South African bus body assembly plant in 1999 are in operation at Golden Arrow.

Noting that it takes about 1 000 hours to assemble a bus and depends on skilled labour, Geyer says it’s important to retain – and expand – these competencies in this country. “I don’t believe you need CBU buses in this country,” says Geyer.

MAN’s Olifantsfontein plant serves not only South



New design features destination boards on the side of the bus for passenger convenience

Africa, but also sub-equatorial Africa. “We do so successfully because our bus bodies are built for tough environments,” says Geyer. “They last, they can be maintained, there are spare parts available. Our buses can be operated for easily 15 years if they’re looked after.”

South Africa serves as a benchmark for MAN in its markets outside Europe, adds Geyer, citing tough operating



An auspicious occasion. At the handover of Golden Arrow’s 1 000th MAN bus (from left): Philip Kalil-Zackey, MAN Truck & Bus SA head of bus sales; Markus Geyer, MD, MAN Truck & Bus SA; Jeroen Lagarde, senior VP, MAN Truck & Bus; Francois Meyer, CEO, Golden Arrow Bus Services; and Donald Grant, minister of transport and public works, Western Cape

terrain (even in cities), as well challenging climatic conditions. Although the market is compact, “what works in South Africa often works elsewhere too”.

Geyer highlighted the two companies’ long histories – with Golden Arrow commemorating 150 years in 2011 and MAN last year celebrating a century of supplying commercial vehicles. “In 2001, MAN sold its first bus to Golden Arrow Bus Services. That was the start of a collaborative partnership between the two companies, which has lead us to this event: we are very proud to hand over the 1 000th MAN bus to Golden Arrow.

“Golden Arrow is a highly professional organisation in every respect, including its focus on its customers and drivers, as well as in its collaboration with MAN. I believe the best results come about if we work together: we see the benefit in the technical modifications to the buses based on input from our customers. If there happens to be a technical issue or a problem, if there’s a relationship then things can be sorted out quicker. We are very proud to be associated with Golden Arrow.”

Jeroen Lagarde, senior VP of MAN Truck & Bus – visiting SA for the handover – emphasised MAN’s policy of collaborating with clients to “develop and produce efficient and safe transport solutions”.

MAN is able to build buses exactly to client specifications, says Lagarde. “In South Africa, MAN offers a range of buses seldom equalled in the global bus market. MAN, with sister company Volkswagen, is able to offer 14 models with 26 derivatives. This means we always have the right product, for town, long distance or rural transport. No other bus manufacturer has similar capacity.”

Lagarde also noted that MAN continually provides innovative technology to make buses as



MAN ups the ante in city, commuter bus design

WHEN Golden Arrow Bus Services CEO Francois Meyer attended an international bus conference in Prague recently, the fact that the operator’s new MAN Lion’s Explorer HB2s offer a USB port for every passenger along with wi-fi service raised eyebrows, because the South African operator has leapfrogged many of its European counterparts in terms of what it offers passengers.

MAN Truck & Bus SA head of bus sales Philip Kalil-Zackey says that MAN strives to consistently improve its products. Celebrating the handover of the 1 000th MAN to Golden Arrow Bus Services, Kalil-Zackey says, “We work with Golden Arrow’s engineering and vehicle specialists to come up with new ways of improving the product every year.”

HB2 enhancements include replacing interior formica with premoulded fibreglass panelling which – as well as adding a modern look – is simpler to maintain, easier to clean and quicker to install. The new design also incorporates destination boards on the side of the bus, designed by Golden Arrow, for passenger convenience. Every seat (upholstered, incidentally, in Golden Arrow fabric) is equipped with a USB port, while on-board wi-fi access is provided too.

As well as the passenger appeal these features provide, the incorporation of a host of coach-like features – including coach-type mirrors, bonded windows, and daytime LED running lights – make for striking good looks.

Kalil-Zackey says that MAN makes a point of working with clients to enhance products to meet their requirements, because the operators know exactly what works for them: “It’s a partnership, in which we both grow and learn from each other. MAN provides the complete bus solution – body and chassis – and Golden Arrow is part of the design of the bus.”

Styling of the new HB2 – which was the 1 000th unit to make its way into the Golden Arrow fleet – resembles the RR9, MAN’s rear engine city bus, 20 of which are running in the Golden Arrow fleet. The RR9 is on par with what MAN is producing in Europe, featuring the same look and feel as the manufacturer’s European products.

Although the front engine commuter bus is the mainstay of South Africa’s public transport industry, commuter passengers are increasingly exposed to BRT vehicles and are demanding the same level of service and ride comfort.

According to Kalil-Zackey, MAN is confident that its expanded product line-up incorporating front and rear engine offerings positions it to meet growing demand for stylish, comfortable and easily accessible vehicles, in line with operators’ growing emphasis on these qualities. ■

SUPPLIERS

safe as possible, commending Golden Arrow for its focus on producing well trained, competent drivers.

Just over five years ago, in March 2011, the two companies commemorated the handover of the 500th MAN bus unit. Since then, Golden Arrow has bought an average of 100 units a year. The intention is to continue to replace between 60 and 100 vehicles a year (if vandalism could be eliminated – 14 buses were burned in the financial year that ended in March – the operator could acquire between 10 and 20 additional new buses a year). Replacement schedules are dictated by vehicle age, condition and operating economy.

As a MAN-accredited self-servicing operator, Golden Arrow carries out its own vehicle maintenance from day one, with technicians trained on-site by MAN. It operates more than a dozen self-service centres, supported by MAN's parts distribution centre. The OEM audits service facilities annually – for the past three years in an unannounced 'blind' audit format.

About 300 drivers a year pass through Golden Arrow's driver training school, with MAN staff pivotal in 'train the trainer' instruction that enables material to be filtered throughout the operation.

From an engineering perspective, six weeks in the year – every second month – a MAN technical trainer spends a week with Golden Arrow, focusing on an area or aspect where Golden Arrow has pinpointed a shortfall in skill levels or has identified an opportunity for improvement. Golden Arrow's dedicated MAN trainer and selected supervisors are trained for that week, following which they disseminate the training throughout the organisation.

With the majority of its passengers earning less than R3 500 a month, Golden Arrow Bus Services provides an essential service to vast numbers of Cape Town commuters. Its buses are inextricably interwoven into the city's identity – and now commuters can keep an eye out for the distinctive livery of the 1 000th MAN/ Golden Arrow bus. ■



Custom covers: the HB2's seats are upholstered in Golden Arrow fabric



Power to the passengers: the new HB2 has a USB port for each passenger

A large advertisement banner for ISRI ISRINGHAUSEN. The top part features a row of orange icons representing various vehicles: a truck, a bus, a van, a tractor, a car, and a motorcycle. Below the icons, the text reads "• PERFORMANCE • RELIABILITY • EXPERIENCE • FUTURE". The background of the banner shows a white truck driving on a road that curves through a snowy landscape with mountains in the distance. In the foreground, five different styles of bus seats are displayed on the road. On the right side, the ISRI ISRINGHAUSEN logo is prominently displayed in orange and black. Below the logo, the text reads: "Isringhausen of South Africa", "Gauteng, Jet Park - Sales: + 27 11 397 8731", "East London - Factory: + 27 43 736 3545", "Email: info@isri.co.za", and "Website: www.isri.co.za".

Down to business at bus indaba

SABOA members had the opportunity to place their concerns and issues on the agenda during the series of bus indabas and strategic planning sessions the Association hosted around the country during the year

SABOA has concluded its series of bus indabas and strategic planning workshops for the year, with the well-attended events giving members insight into the Association's activities for the year as well as providing the opportunity to provide input on issues that should form the focus of next year's efforts.

The Gauteng event took place at the Birchwood Hotel in October, with SABOA special adviser Professor Jackie Walters presenting an overview of matters dealt with in 2015 and 2016, including: policy issues; public transport; committees; road traffic regulation developments; the Road Transport Management System (RTMS); driver training academy; review of the White Paper on National Transport Policy; taxi intimidation; SMME empowerment; training; cross-border issues; B-BBEE bus sector charter; extension of the bargaining council agreement; BRTs; and the 2017 National Conference and Exhibition.

Walters commenced by reiterating SABOA's vision, which is to serve as the credible voice of an inclusive, efficient, sustainable and transforming bus industry, which plays a pivotal role in an integrated transport system through safe, reliable and affordable bus services that add value and is attractive to our stakeholders.

The Department of Transport (DoT) had announced that negotiated contracts would be concluded with commuter operators to bring more stability to the industry. Increased funding for public transport continued to be a major focus of the Association. SABOA met with National Treasury and DoT on 1 June 2015 to discuss the importance of additional funding for the industry, with a round table with DoT on 23 July 2015 attended by National Treasury. SABOA also met the Portfolio Committee on Transport on 4 August 2015.

The mid-term budget in October 2015 allocated an additional R1,4 billion for public transport for the next three financial years, but budget cuts reduced this to R700 million over three years:

2016/17: R250 million; 2017/18: R250 million; and 2018/19: R200 million.

Addressing the 2016 SABOA conference, DoT highlighted subsidised scholar transport issues: the number of learners who qualify for subsidised transport exceeds available budget; new settlements and schools need to be co-ordinated; funding streams need to be able to respond to constantly changing demands for services; dedicated services can respond to changing demands better than contracted commuter bus services; and data management and reporting challenges. Scholar transport does form part of DoT's Turnaround Plan.

In Gauteng, in September 2014 the DoE awarded a contract without complying with evaluation criteria. An independent investigation was instigated, but terminated before completion. This remained unresolved, despite SABOA's efforts, and SABOA has referred the matter to the Public Protector, who has confirmed that investigation must be completed by 31 March 2017.

In view of the many challenges facing the subsidised commuter transport/ bus industry, SABOA requested a bus summit to discuss the financial crisis in the commuter bus industry, empowerment of SMME bus operators and various operational issues. A round table discussion was held on 23 July 2015.

At the 2016 SABOA conference, DoT announced that its Turnaround Plan was being finalised for consultation. According to the Plan subsidised scholar transport and community services in rural areas should be addressed, while public transport needs to be designed and managed as an integrated network (bus, rail and taxi) rather than as isolated modes, simplifying alignment of funding.

In light of lessons learned over the past seven years IPTN components should be scaled down. A different strategy is necessary to determine appropriate solutions for different public transport challenges in each area – and funding for public transport needs to be revived to mitigate fragmentation.

In terms of tourism transport, SATSA and SABOA worked together to get the NPTR established – a new dispensation for tourist-type services. DoT indicated in 2014 that the NPTR would be operational the following April. SABOA's invitation to DoT to

provide feedback on the operational readiness of the NPTR at the 2016 conference was declined, with the minister of transport subsequently announcing that the NPTR would be operational from 29 July 2016.

On 30 October 2015 SABOA met with tourism minister Derek Hanekom on: reduction in tourist numbers; marketing of SA as a tourist destination; revised visa requirements and their impact; lack of progress on implementation of the National Public Transport Regulator; delays in obtaining permits/operating licenses from Provincial Regulatory Entities and the impact on coach operators; taxi intimidation and violence.

Road traffic regulations published but not in force included: provisional driving licenses (Reg 107 A); RWC for 10 year old vehicles (Reg 138 (1) (k)); driving hours (Reg 272 A-C); and speed governors – 1 December 2016 (Reg 215). Regulations on lower general speed limits and driver licences had been published in draft form but not finalised.

The National Council had resolved to adopt the Road Transport Management System (RTMS) and encourage its members to apply for the accreditation, as it has distinct benefits for operators and improves road safety.

A second workshop to review the White Paper on National Transport Policy was hosted by DoT this March. No major shift in policy was expected, as the overall vision and strategic objectives remain. Among the numerous challenges facing the transport sector are: fragmentation in government planning, implementation and funding of public transport; ineffective measures to improve transport safety, in particular road transport;

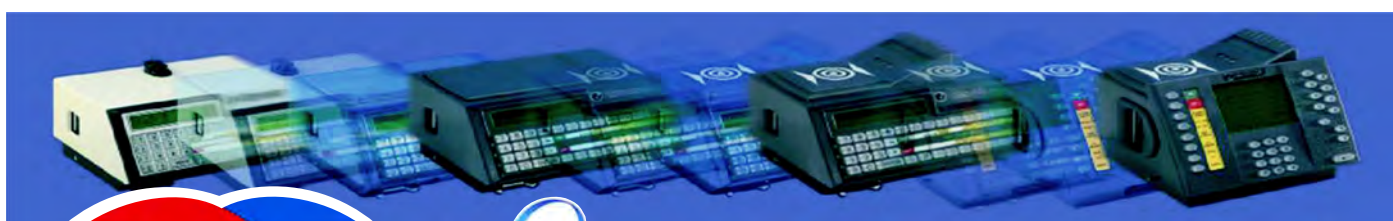
persistent under-performance in passenger and freight rail transport; slow progress in serving marginalised rural populations; poor implementation of existing policy. The review process is expected to be completed in March 2017, followed by a green paper and new white paper.


Increasing concern among SABOA members about driver behaviour spurred a one-day workshop, under the auspices of the Operations Committee, on 13 August 2014. This included presentations from bus and coach operators, TETA, a medical practitioner, proposals from various speakers to improve driver behaviour, and a presentation from the Automobile Association in the United Kingdom. A decision was taken to establish a driver training academy based on international standards.

The Automobile Association in the UK was requested to provide SABOA with a quotation to assist in establishing a driver training academy and a unanimous decision taken by Exco in July 2015 to support the concept plan. Phase 1 entails research to determine the business model and training requirements. A steering committee to guide the research team has been established and SABOA is seeking funding.

Because of ongoing intimidation by taxi operators on bus operators, SABOA requested the minister of transport in December 2015 to appeal to the taxi industry to refrain from intimidating bus operators. The minister reported a discussion with Santaco leadership had led to Santaco's commitment to non-violence in interacting with other public transport stakeholders.

With no improvement, SABOA requested the minister to arrange a meeting between Santaco, NTA and SABOA to address




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this. A meeting with SAPS took place on 29 June 2016, and a meeting with Santaco and NTA on 8 August 2016. A Stakeholder Forum has been established.

An Empowerment Committee consisting of Council members deals with empowerment of SMME members of SABOA. It has been busy with several initiatives in various provinces, but its efforts are hampered by the lack of financial information from SMMEs as well as funding for these transactions.

In January 2016, the Empowerment Committee submitted a report of its activities to the National Council of SABOA and requested that SABOA should recommend to government that 15% of all commuter contracts should be awarded to SMME bus operators.

The proposal was approved by National Council and letters to this effect sent to NDoT and MECs for transport in the provinces, to be followed up by the Empowerment Committee with visits to the MECs.

SABOA subscribes to Tenderscan and throughout the year, as and when tender opportunities became known, members were made aware of these opportunities.

The following training programmes were presented with funding from the TETA: Advanced scheduling (skills programme); RPL National Certificate: Professional Driving (learnership); and FET Certificate: Road Transport Supervision (learnership). In addition, 330 students enrolled for UJ's Road Passenger Transport Management Programme.

SABOA raised its concern with the C-BRTA about the number of permits issued to taxi operators in relation to bus operators, intimidation by taxi operators on bus operators, the questioning of the legality of bus operators' permits by taxi operators and the impression that the focus of the C-BRTA is mainly on the taxi industry.

SABOA stressed that – as most cross-border routes are long-distance routes – the bus industry should form the backbone of cross-border transport rather than the taxi industry. Taxi-type vehicles are not designed for long-distance routes, unlike buses.

The C-BRTA needs to find a scientific methodology to regulate market access to avoid over-trading.

Taxi intimidation has resulted in the non-issuing of permits to Lesotho. Despite court orders to prevent taxi operators from intimidating bus operators, the matter remains unresolved. This, together with the fact that the Free State government does not recognise cross-border permits, resulted in the non-issuing of permits to Lesotho.

After the publication of the revised DTI Codes of Good Practice in October 2014, DoT solicited inputs to align the Bus and Coach Sector Charters to the revised DTI B-BBEE Codes of Good Practice. Council appointed a sub-committee to interact with DoT

on the alignment process. SABOA's proposals regarding preferential procurement are still under consideration by the Department, but most of the other proposals have been accepted.

The draft Bus Sector Charter was published in the Government Gazette, with comment to be submitted to the Department of Trade and Industry by 28 June 2016. The SABOA BEE sub-committee commented on the draft and response is awaited from DTI.

In April 2012 the Main Collective Agreement of SARPBAC was extended to non-parties (excluding scholar services, Transnet and local authorities). SABOA is assisting its members who are not members of SABEA or COBEO to establish an employers' organisation to enable SARPBAC representation. SABOA is verifying whether there is sufficient support (a minimum of 2 000 employees are required) to register an employers' organisation.

Although SABOA is in favour of BRTs, the viability of the systems in relatively low density areas (compared to international densities in, for example, South America) and long distances is questionable. While Johannesburg, Cape Town, Tshwane and George have made the most progress implementing BRT systems, SMME bus operators are excluded as they are not regarded as 'affected operators'.

Given SABOA's view that exclusion is the result of a narrow interpretation of section 41 of the National Land Transport Act (NLTA) by the cities, it has submitted a proposal to NDoT to amend section 41 of the NLTA to eliminate misinterpretation.

In a meeting with NDoT on 8 December 2015 to discuss SABOA's proposal, there was consensus that SMME bus operators should not be excluded from BRT systems. NDoT and SABOA will develop a strategy to engage provincial and local governments to change their policies of excluding SMME bus operators in future BRT developments.

Walters concluded his overview with a summary of research undertaken by the Association, as well as recommendations flowing from that research.

The Johannesburg bus indaba was started with presentations by Ibilti's Yolande van Niekerk, detailing the company's SABOA offering, and Thebe Connect's Renier van Jaarsveld, who outlined plans for creating a digital mall aboard buses, to the benefit of operators as well as their passengers.

Concluding the session, delegates were divided into groups to come up with topics members would like SABOA to attend to next year. The purpose of this was to canvass as wide a member base as possible, instead of depending solely on the traditional two-day planning session at the outset of each year. The intention was to highlight areas not being covered which should be attended to, to pinpoint topics that may have been missed, and to identify areas that should be tackled in greater depth. ■

How **LOCAL** can you go?

Busco/ Busafrica has a 'positive negative': producing between 10 and 12 buses a month, it refuses to expand production and dilute its hands-on approach – which means that clients may have to wait for their buses. However, buyers' patience attests to the quality of the offering and the value in the manufacturer's strategy

MANY South Africans and South African companies punch well above their weight, giving truth to the phrase 'local is lekker' – and 100% locally owned Busco/ Busafrica bus body builder can claim its spot in this line-up (Busafrica is the manufacturer of the Predator bus bodywork and Busco is the marketing arm).

Earlier this year, a fully loaded SA Army Predator bus rolled twice as the driver attempted to negotiate a mountain pass. Although the death toll was 11, the Busco team is adamant that it could have been far worse: seated passengers escaped significant injury and the integrity of the vehicle's structure was maintained, evident in post-crash photographs.

Willie van Zyl, Mark Tiedemann and colleague Lloyd Baldwin take enormous pride in what the Bapsfontein-based operation produces. Busco recently delivered the first six buses of a large order to a client who has run through the gamut of OEMs and body builders in South Africa. The company's CEO was bowled over when Van Zyl, Tiedemann and Baldwin were behind the wheel of three of the six Predator buses as they drove into his depot.

Tiedemann says that this new client is now proud to be part of the Predator pride. The company is behind its products 100%, says Tiedemann, and it's this level of commitment to which he attributes the high volumes of repeat business Busco wins: in the past four years, the lowest point has been 75%. "This says a lot about our Predator product, support and how we treat our clients. We believe in a personal, hands-on approach to every vehicle. Whether you buy one bus from us or 50 buses, you get the same level of service, the same commitment. We take pride and have a passion in everything we do, and we instil that pride in our staff and production team."

Van Zyl asserts that when a bus leaves the gate, he doesn't ever want to see it again: "We're happy to see the customer, but not the bus – because if you see the bus back at the factory, it means it's not working and you have a warranty issue to fix."

However, build quality of the Predator keeps warranty issues to a minimum: during its past financial year, Busafrica has spent a minuscule amount in tackling warranty issues, which is an enviable statistic for a manufacturer with



approximately 380 vehicles still under warranty in the market at any time.

"We don't build the cheapest vehicles, but we deliver absolutely the best quality and value for money," continues Van Zyl. "We use superior materials. Every single bus that leaves the Predator production line, over and above our standard stringent quality gates, is also personally inspected by either myself, Mark or Lloyd. Every single vehicle is taken on a test drive to ensure that there are no teething issues the client may encounter. When that vehicle lands in his depot, he can put his number plates on and start operating the next day.

"We don't overpromise, because clients base their planning on what we tell them. We don't lie about delivery dates to secure business: we are always open, honest and transparent, even if we can only deliver months down the line."

The factory produces between 10 and 12 units a month, depending on the level of specification, deliberately kept to a manageable size that enables the members' hands-on approach. This means personal involvement in every deal: from the day a client puts an enquiry in, to the day he takes delivery of the vehicle. One effect of this strategy is to cushion Busco/ Busafrica against the cyclical nature that governs the bus and coach sector: half day Fridays are a thing of the past, while Saturdays are being used for overtime production too. "The industry is characterised by ups and downs, along with short weeks, but we've been working overtime because our order book is so tight, and we stick to our promises" comments Van Zyl.

Saying you're committed to clients is one thing, but clearly the products emanating from the Bapsfontein facility play a key role too. According to Van Zyl and Tiedemann, the company makes a point of keeping close to its clients to discern their unique requirements. "We're always looking at innovative ways to improve our product," says Tiedemann. "We recently launched our luxury version, the Predator Supreme, and the



The Predator pride is expanding steadily, according to Mark Tiedemann (left) and Willie van Zyl

response from the industry has been overwhelming. We already have confirmed orders until mid-2017.

"We listen to our clients and we listen to their requirements. If we get ideas from them and they're feasible and of benefit to the majority of our operators, we will implement them as a standard in our vehicle. Even our most basic Predator Commuter bodywork comes standard with a host of additional extras. We put all these things into our vehicle as standard features. We have solid cut-out tinted windows, we have two-piece curved panoramic-type front windscreens, stretch panels down the side of the vehicle. The aesthetics of the vehicle are very pleasing: that's from our basic Predator commuter vehicle up to a high spec Predator Supreme."

Van Zyl acknowledges that several times design changes proposed by the younger members of the team which he greeted with scepticism have proven to be winners. Tiedemann continues: "We strike a very good balance between the practicality of our vehicle and the aesthetics, plus it's a universal vehicle that can work across any number of applications. Operators can use them for contract work during the week and for special hire on weekends. Even our standard Predator Commuter vehicle has a semi-luxury appeal."

Van Zyl first spotted the hoop system which lies at the core of the structure of the company's vehicles overseas – long before his Busafrica days – and agitated for the adoption of the format, with no success. The day Busafrica opened its doors nine years ago, the company adopted the hoop system, says Van Zyl, and remains the sole manufacturer to have done so. This is why the Predator buses are so strong: because the hoops are continual tubes from side to side, vulnerable weld spots are eliminated (aeroplane construction is based on a similar system). Tubes are secured using laser cut gusset plates.

Whereas most manufacturers confine themselves to structural testing in the form of a calculated or bench test, Busafrica did the calculation and then built a model and headed for Gerotek for a physical test and certification. "You need 44,1 kJ to pass rollover," says Van Zyl. "Ours sits at 87,6 kJ – nearly double." Presented with the option of going lighter on the structure, Van Zyl's response was that he was building buses not only to pass rollover, but to withstand harsh and unforgiving African operating conditions.

Despite this, says Tiedemann, the structure is "one of the strongest and lightest in the industry", which offers benefits in terms of fuel consumption, wear and tear, performance, and carrying capacity. "We offer, by far, the most luggage space on any 4x2 bus body in the bus industry currently." Raising the body 360 mm enables big suitcases to be easily accommodated in the locker space.

Initial vehicle design was a collaborative effort, including input from the architect of South Africa's rollover testing standards.

Bodies are constructed from certified WA355 steel, a phosphate-treated mild steel with optimum carbon content for flexibility. Despite the industry move towards 3CR12, Van Zyl and Tiedemann hold the view that it is too brittle for bus bodies and is difficult to repair as its lack of flexibility means it tends to snap. The material is not impervious to rust. Instead, Busafrica employs a full dipping process, along with phosphating, primer and injecting textile into the tubes' interiors. "We have had Predator buses running in Swakopmund and coastal areas for nine years and they're still in perfect condition, because they were treated properly," asserts Van Zyl.

Another of Busafrica's big drives is local content. Tiedemann says, "We're very proud to say that at 96% we probably have the highest local content of any bus body builder in the country. We believe in job creation in our own country and sustained development. If South Africa is going to grow, it has to focus on local manufacturers. Local capital has to be retained in this country. We don't jump from supplier to supplier, but we have a list of approved suppliers and we keep them under pressure to get a very reasonable price from them for the quality they produce. We dictate the standard to them and every item that comes into the factory goes through a strict quality check before it even goes into the store. Every component gets signed off before it enters the manufacturing process. That helps eliminate a lot of warranty issues after a bus is built, because quality control starts the second those components come through your gate."

In addition, continues Tiedemann, Busco/ Busafrica provides an off-the-shelf parts guarantee that ensures that a client can walk in 24/7 and get the part he needs – across the range.

Busafrica is also proud of its Level 3 B-BBEE rating, which reflects significant investments in training. Internally, the company conducts a great deal of skills training and development on-line, promoting growth within its own ranks. This policy reflects in the stability of the labour force, the majority of whom have been with the company since the inception of the Predator product. "Looking after our people and being fair means we get commitment from them and quality input into the product." The company has not lost a single day to strikes, despite the fact that the 81-member workforce is unionised. Close to half of factory workers have attained gold status on the company's incentive scheme.

"A successful business is about partnership – with your

workers, your suppliers and your customers – and respecting each person, from the bottom of the floor right to the end user."

The Predator pride continues to expand steadily, continues Tiedemann, and the brand has become well known throughout southern Africa, including in Malawi, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Mozambique and Namibia, Swaziland and Botswana

Van Zyl has been in the bus industry since 1974, Tiedemann since 1991 when he joined Van Zyl's Busaf sales force as junior salesman, which means the two have a 25-year history. Van Zyl established Busco Marketing in 1996 and Tiedemann came on board as partner in 1997, also two decades ago. Further down the line, the pair established a bus manufacturing factory, and Busafrica is now in its ninth year of operation, having been created on 1 May 2008 and commencing production that November.

Van Zyl relishes the fact that it has been a positive cash flow company from day one: "We've never had to rely on any financial assistance."

It hasn't all been plain sailing, with Tiedemann highlighting the fact that the Predator bodywork went against the tide in blurring the traditional clear-cut distinction between commuter, semi-luxury and luxury vehicles.

"A lot of products have been designed overseas for overseas operations," he continues. "They've never been designed for South African operations. Southern Africa is unique: there are areas where vehicles go through rivers; there are harsh, dusty conditions; there are wet, muddy conditions. There are cold areas, there are hot areas. All of those factors have to be taken into account when designing a vehicle. We've paid our school fees, finding out what works and what doesn't work – and we continue to evolve."

"If you're not prepared to push yourself beyond your safety zone, you will never get to grips with new ideas and expose yourself to better manufacturing process, better components that become available, better materials. All those things contribute to a better product."

Busafrica/ Busco remains hungry for new ideas that can be adapted and incorporated into the Predator, continues Tiedemann, adding, "Some of our best ideas come from our small, hands-on operators."

Busafrica/ Busco works with all the OEM chassis suppliers, and the Predator bodywork is homologated with Hino, Iveco, MAN and VW, Mercedes-Benz, Scania, VDL and Volvo chassis.

"Unless a vehicle is 100%, it's not acceptable," concludes Tiedemann. "We have so much pride and passion in what we do. If it's not acceptable to us, why should be acceptable to the customer? We do it right, first time." ■

Fogmaker fights fire in front engine format

The Fogmaker fire suppression system was recently put through its paces in a demonstration in a front engine bus

FOGMAKER South Africa has successfully completed its first fire test in a front engine vehicle, proving the diversity of its fire suppression system.

Fogmaker has conducted hundreds of tests in rear engine buses and coaches around the world, proving the system's ability to detect and suppress a fire within seconds. "In South Africa, however, front engine buses are prevalent," says John Russell, Fogmaker South Africa business development manager. "We wanted to do this test on a bus typically used in the South African landscape."

Russell says with bus driver compartments being fairly enclosed and close to the engine, there were some concerns from operators how the system being triggered would affect a driver, as well as the passengers in the first few rows in terms of oxygen levels and temperature. "We also wanted to answer the basic question: is our system as effective on a front engine vehicle?" he says. According to Russell, the answer is an unequivocal 'yes'.

Having brought in two of Fogmaker's international experts from Sweden to help with the test, a pool fire was simulated using four trays containing diesel placed in the engine compartment of the bus.

"Once the fire was started we closed the engine compartment access hatches and then triggered a diesel spray at 4 bar into the side of the engine to simulate a spray fire," says Russell.

A fire in an engine compartment, if left unattended, would typically burn through a diesel or hydraulic hose under pressure, creating a dangerous spray fire, according to Russell. Oxygen level and temperature was measured in the driver compartment and the passenger seats in the first row directly behind the cab. With the engine compartment reaching 900°C, the fire system extinguished the blaze in seconds.

The Fogmaker system, designed for engine compartments and other enclosed or semi-enclosed spaces, is reported by Fogmaker to have a unique extinguishing performance, as it both chokes and cools down the fire, at the same time as the foam additive prevents the fire from re-igniting.

Water mist is generated under high pressure through nozzles creating microdrops with an average size of 50 µm. One drop of water typically 1 mm in diameter is converted to 8 000 of these micro drops. When these microdrops come into contact with heat they convert from water to steam, and in doing so expand 1 700 times. This expansion forces air and oxygen out of the compartment and suffocates the fire in seconds.

"Our system is deployed for a further 60 seconds after a fire has been extinguished. In this test we were able to bring the temperature in the engine compartment down from 900°C to below 100°C in less than 10 seconds."

According to Russell, Fogmaker's fire suppression system attacks all three components of the fire triangle – oxygen, heat and fuel. "The water mist reaches everywhere within the protected area to ensure the suppression of the fire and the elimination of the factors that could result in re-ignition."

He says with new regulations passed in Europe requiring that all new coaches be fitted with automatic fire detection and suppression systems by 2018, the concept is fast gaining traction.

"The increased requirements for Euro V and VI vehicles to meet reduced noise and environmental regulations means that buses and trucks are running at higher temperatures, with high injection pressures with greater encapsulation and insulation levels, thus placing them at elevated risk of fire – hence the move towards automatic fire detection and suppression systems globally."

Russell says while not yet regulated in South Africa, several market segments are showing a keen interest in these systems to protect high-value assets and where consequential damages are high. In this context Fogmaker is a cost effective solution, he concludes.



John Russell conducting a Fogmaker demonstration at the SABOA conference earlier this year. Testing has now been conducted in a front engine bus, as this configuration dominates South Africa's commuter bus segment

By Liesl Venter

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